

"Service"

John 13:1-17

Baxter Exum (#964)
Four Lakes Church of Christ
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Introduction:

This morning I would like for us to consider a request that has been turned in by our members several times over the past few years. The account of what we are about to study is only found in one of the four gospel accounts and is found in **John 13**. It is an event that happened just a few hours before Jesus was betrayed and arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane. The event that we are about to study, therefore, took place on the night before Jesus was murdered. We know that Jesus met with the twelve apostles in the Upper Room in order to celebrate the Passover, and during that final meal, we know that Jesus taught some incredibly profound lessons. And this morning, I would like for us to consider some of those lessons that Jesus taught as He washed the apostles' feet. **»PPT»**

We know that Jesus and His apostles walked almost everywhere they went. We know that they wore sandals. We know that most of the roads and trails were not paved. And we also know that they shared their roads with animals. All of this is not a good combination! In fact, it probably would have been rather disgusting! Maybe you can imagine with me what that would be like. We add to this the fact that city streets often doubled as sewers—people would just dump it out the window into the streets below, and we can imagine that people's feet would get incredibly dirty.

It was common, therefore, for a servant or slave to wash the feet of the guests as they came in the front door for any kind of meal or special occasion. The host would not want the meal to go on with such a terrible smell in the room. We know from the Scriptures, however, that the disciples were using a borrowed room for the Passover meal. There would not have been a servant to wash their feet as they came in. We know that someone had apparently provided the washbasin, a pitcher of water, and a towel, and yet no one was there to actually do the washing.

Perhaps you can imagine with me that the apostles come in, Jesus comes in—maybe they sit down to start the meal, but the smell was so bad—they could not ignore it anymore. And finally, Jesus gets up from the table in the middle of the meal, He takes off His clothes, He wraps a towel around His waist, and the Son of God starts going around the room washing their feet one by one. That is the picture we are about to consider. If you will, please look with me at **John 13:1-17...**

¹ Now before the Feast of the Passover, Jesus knowing that His hour had come that He would depart out of this world to the

Father, having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end. ² During supper, the devil having already put into the heart of Judas Iscariot, the son of Simon, to betray Him, ³ Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come forth from God and was going back to God, ⁴ got up from supper, and laid aside His garments; and taking a towel, He girded Himself. ⁵ Then He poured water into the basin, and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel with which He was girded. ⁶ So He came to Simon Peter. He said to Him, "Lord, do You wash my feet?" ⁷ Jesus answered and said to him, "What I do you do not realize now, but you will understand hereafter." ⁸ Peter said to Him, "Never shall You wash my feet!" Jesus answered him, "If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me." ⁹ Simon Peter said to Him, "Lord, then wash not only my feet, but also my hands and my head." ¹⁰ Jesus said to him, "He who has bathed needs only to wash his feet, but is completely clean; and you are clean, but not all of you." ¹¹ For He knew the one who was betraying Him; for this reason He said, "Not all of you are clean." ¹² So when He had washed their feet, and taken His garments and reclined at the table again, He said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? ¹³ "You call Me Teacher and Lord; and you are right, for so I am. ¹⁴ "If I then, the Lord and the Teacher, washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. ¹⁵ "For I gave you an example that you also should do as I did to you. ¹⁶ "Truly, truly, I say to you, a slave is not greater than his master, nor is one who is sent greater than the one who sent him. ¹⁷ "If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.

As we look back at these seventeen verses, I would like for us to consider several very basic ideas.

I. First of all, we are obviously impressed by the importance of SERVICE.

»PPT»

It seems that it is rare these days to find great leaders who are willing to truly serve their people. Maybe you can remember what happened a number of years ago when King Abdullah of Jordan pretended to be a common citizen and drove the streets of Amman Jordan in a taxi so that he could connect with his people. Part of his popularity goes back to the fact that he is willing to connect with the common people. He stepped out to see the world from a different point of view. It is so refreshing, therefore, to see a great leader taking on the role of a servant.

In a similar way, we find here in **John 13** that Jesus got up from dinner and washed the disciples' feet in order to set an example. As far as I can tell, the word "**example**" (in **verse 15**) is the only time that the word "**example**" is ever used in the four gospel accounts. And so we learn, therefore, that taking on the role of a

servant must be extremely important. As Mark Twain once said, **“Few things are harder to put up with than the annoyance of a good example.”**

As I was preparing for this morning’s lesson, I learned something else that was very interesting. Did you know that the word “volunteer” is never used in the Scriptures? We are never told to “volunteer” for anything. But on the other hand, various forms of the word **“servant”** are used over 130 times! You might remember that a lot of the books of the New Testament start out with the writers referring to themselves as **“bond-servants”** of Jesus Christ. They did not see themselves as volunteers, but they saw themselves as servants (or slaves) of God. In other words, they were following the example that Jesus set in **John 13**. There are so many ways that Jesus could have avoided doing what He did. He could have said...

- It is not my job to wash your feet.
- I have done my share over the past 3 ½ years.
- I have had a very difficult week, and I am just not up to washing your feet.
- In about twelve hours, I will be murdered—I do not have the time to wash your feet.
- There are more important things I need to be doing.
- I do not enjoy washing feet.

And yet we find that Jesus did not give any excuses. He could have, and yet the Bible says that He took off His clothes, put on the towel, poured the water, and started washing feet without even saying a word.

In the same way today, it is so refreshing when someone takes on a special project even though it may not be very glamorous. Several years ago, I remember putting out an appeal for more people to clean the church building, and someone said, **“But I do not really enjoy scrubbing toilets.”** As if the rest of us do! There are some things we do, not because they are pleasant, but simply because they need to be done.

At this point, some people may ask: Does this mean that we need to start washing people’s feet? And the answer is: If someone has dirty feet that need cleaning, then yes! I think we are all familiar with several denominational churches, though, that practice foot washing as a religious ritual. A number of years ago, I had a series of Bible studies with a leader from the Seventh Day Adventist Church. Apparently his congregation had an annual foot-washing Sunday. However, from talking with others, I discovered that people would go into that ceremony with some of the cleanest feet that you have ever seen! Can you imagine what you would do if you knew that someone would wash your feet in front of the entire congregation next Sunday morning? Before we came to worship, our feet would be scrubbed, our nails would be trimmed, ladies would be getting pedicures. The men would be getting pedicures! In fact, it would end up being a mockery of the lesson that Jesus was actually teaching.

And so the question really is: How do we serve? I would suggest that we simply look around. Go through the church directory and prayerfully consider the challenges that

are being faced by various members of this congregation. Are there older Christian widows? They may not need their feet washed (maybe they do—I don't know), but they may need something else. Perhaps someone needs a ride to worship. Perhaps someone needs a word of encouragement. Perhaps someone needs to have some yard work done. Perhaps someone needs to have some snow shoveled. Perhaps someone who has been sick for an extended period of time might appreciate a meal. Perhaps someone needs to have the house vacuumed or the trash taken out to the street. I would suggest that we can fulfill the Law of Christ by going out and doing those things that need to be done.

I would suggest that we look at ourselves, that we look at our talents and abilities and ask ourselves: Are we using those skills as servants of God? And if we are not: Then how can we improve? How can we grow in the service that we offer? Can we even imagine what the church would be like if every one of us made a commitment to use our God-given abilities to serve in every possible way? And so we find, first of all, that Jesus gave us an example of service as He washed the apostles' feet, and we learn that we are to have the attitude of a servant towards one another.

II. As we look back at John 13, we find another basic idea as we are reminded about the importance of HUMILITY. »PPT»

One of the first reasons Jesus washed their feet is because their feet were dirty and He wanted to demonstrate the importance of service. But He also did it because their hearts were full of pride. In fact, in Luke's parallel account, we learn that the disciples were having an argument about which one of them would be greatest in the kingdom of God. Some of the apostles, then, were arguing about positions of honor and positions of great authority. We are told that the mother of James and John wanted them to be given positions of power—one on each side of Jesus—one on the right and one on the left. They were looking for power and authority.

I am reminded of a newly built elementary school and how they were preparing for the very first day of school in the new building. To make the day special, they had invited a Marine Corps color guard to come out and raise the flag for the very first time. The day before the ceremony, the Marine in charge of the unit called to confirm directions to the school, and after doing so, he was asked by the school secretary whether he was sending Marines who like children. Apparently there was a brief pause on the other end of the line before the man replied, **"Ma'am, if I tell them to like children, they will like children."**

And so maybe some of the apostles were looking for a position like that—a position of authority where they would be able to tell others what to do. Luke tells us about the discussion in **Luke 22:24-27**...

²⁴ And there arose also a dispute among them as to which one of them was regarded to be greatest. ²⁵ And He said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who have authority over them are called 'Benefactors.' ²⁶ "But it is not this

way with you, but the one who is the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like the servant. ²⁷ "For who is greater, the one who reclines at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at the table? But I am among you as the one who serves.

Jesus, therefore, in response to their argument about who would be greatest, had to teach a very important lesson about the importance of humility. Unfortunately, putting ourselves first is a very difficult habit to break. In fact, it seems to start rather early in life. Some time ago, I ran across what are known as Toddler Property Laws. If you have had a toddler in your home, then some of this might seem a little familiar...

- If I like it, it's mine.
- If I can take it away from you, it's mine.
- If I had it a while ago, it's mine.
- If I say it's mine, it's mine.
- If it looks like mine, it's mine.
- If I say I saw it first, it's mine.
- If you're having fun with it, it's mine.
- If you lay it down, it's mine.
- If it is broken, it's yours.

And as I said, unfortunately, this kind of thinking can continue well into adulthood. And it appears that it had also infected some of the apostles, and so Jesus had to step in with a lesson on humility. We can think about the apostle Paul and the words that he wrote several years later, in **Philippians 2:3-8**. Paul said...

³ Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; ⁴ do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others. ⁵ Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷ but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. ⁸ Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

The lesson we learn here is a lesson in humility—especially as it applies to service. We learn that there is no service we can perform as Christians that is beneath our dignity. Again, it might involve cleaning a bathroom, or mowing someone's lawn, or pulling weeds, or any number of things.

Dave Thomas, the founder of Wendy's, was known for his humble service. When asked what made him so successful, he replied, "**My MBA.**" But he was not referring to a graduate degree in business administration. As you might know, Dave Thomas was a high school dropout. He was referring to his "**Mop and Bucket Attitude.**"

There was no job too insignificant. Mr. Thomas was willing to jump in and get the job done. In the same way, Jesus was teaching a lesson on the importance of humility.

III. Before we close, there is another lesson I would like for us to consider from John 13, and that is, THE WAY TO TRUE GREATNESS IS NOT ALWAYS THE WAY IT SEEMS. In other words, THE WAY UP IS ACTUALLY DOWN. »PPT»

A number of you have probably been to the Sears Tower in downtown Chicago. I have been there a number of times. It remains the tallest building in the United States, and until last year was the tallest building in the world, being surpassed by a tower in Dubai on August 12 of last year. If you go in the Sears Tower from street level, you discover a sign pointing to the observation deck on the 110th floor—to the world's tallest observation deck, to the world's tallest public restrooms—and it is interesting, though, that the sign to the world's tallest observation deck actually points DOWN a flight of stairs! And so to get to the top of the tallest building in the United States, you have to start by going down, and there are no exceptions. You cannot get to the top of that building by going up—the other elevators do not go all the way to the top! At the bottom of the stairs, of course, you then get on the world's fastest elevator, and that elevator takes you to the top in only 45 seconds.

I think we can look at John 13, and we can say the same thing about the relationship between service and greatness in the Lord's church. The greatest Christian is not the preacher or someone who has a prominent role in the congregation, but the greatest Christian is the one who is not ashamed to serve. The greatest Christians are those who visit the sick, and scrub the floors, and do the things that some of us do not make the time to do.

I remember taking a class many years ago under Dr. Dowell Flatt, and brother Flatt used to say that the greatest preacher in the Lord's church is probably preaching for a tiny congregation somewhere in Wyoming. He was trying to impress upon us that greatness does not come from always hopping from one church to another until you finally end up at a large congregation. Greatness comes from serving the Lord, even if no one knows who you are.

In another account of the argument between the apostles that we studied a few minutes ago, the apostle Matthew later wrote these words in Matthew 20:25-28...

²⁵ But Jesus called them to Himself and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. ²⁶ "It is not this way among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant, ²⁷ and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave; ²⁸ just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."

And so as we consider the account in **John 13**, we understand that the way to greatness in the eyes of God actually comes through a life of humility and service. In fact, if we were to read the rest of the New Testament, starting from this point, we would find that the apostles never again had a problem with the idea of humility and service. Starting at this point, they finally understood that the way up is actually down.

Many years later, the apostle Peter wrote in **1 Peter 5:5-6**, ***"...and all of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, for GOD IS OPPOSED TO THE PROUD, BUT GIVES GRACE TO THE HUMBLE. Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time."*** As Peter told his readers to "clothe" themselves with humility toward one another, I cannot help but think that a very specific image came to mind—the Son of God taking off His garments and wrapping Himself with the towel of a servant.

Conclusion & Invitation:

As we come to the end of our study, we need to look back at the very first verse of **John 13**, because in **John 13:1** we find the motivation for the service that Jesus performed as well as the motivation for any service that we perform nearly 2,000 years later. We are not to be motivated by guilt or by fear of punishment or to earn our salvation, but please look again with me at **verse 1**, ***"Now before the Feast of the Passover, Jesus knowing that His hour had come that He would depart out of this world to the Father, having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end."*** We need to remember that the apostles were not an easy bunch to love. They were arguing about who was the greatest. One of them would betray Him shortly after dinner. One would deny him a few hours after that. And the remaining ten would desert Him altogether.

And yet Jesus was motivated by love. As He would go on to say in the same chapter, in **John 13:34-35**, ***"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."*** And as He said in the next chapter, in **John 14:15**, ***"If you love Me, you will keep My commandments."***

This morning we have come together to celebrate the amazing love of God. Many years later, the apostle John would summarize the Christian faith in **1 John 4:10-11**. John says, ***"In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the [atoning sacrifice] for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another."***

We respond to the sacrifice of Jesus with loving obedience. We follow Jesus through His death, burial, and resurrection. We die to sin when we turn away from sin, we are buried with Him in baptism, and then we are raised up to live the Christian life. If you would like to know more, we would love to study the Bible with you, but if you

are ready to obey the gospel right now, you can let us know as we sing the next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: church@fourlakescoc.org